

August 18

Ezekiel 15-18

Today, not a ton of application for you, but I would like to explain the meaning of some of the many images you encountered in your reading. You probably have been reading and saying "What is up with that?" So I'll just explain...

There are two main images that God directs Ezekiel use to portray the nation of Israel, the vine and the bride. The chapters we read today, and in particular the use of these two primary images, the vine and the bride should remind us that even though Israel and the church are not identical, they are connected because they stand in essentially the same relationship to God and the very same images are used to describe them.

The vine image of chapter 15 which is traceable back in Old Testament literature to the blessing that Jacob conferred upon his sons in Genesis 49, is altered a bit by Ezekiel in that he focuses not upon the fruit of the vine but upon the wood. Usually this emphasis falls upon the fruitfulness of the vine in producing grapes. The reference to the fire is probably an allusion to the fires set by the Babylonians in 597 BC when Jehoiachin was carried off to Babylon but the city of Jerusalem was not entirely destroyed. Jerusalem had already been charred. Now it will be burned to a crisp. Ezekiel's words would have stung deeply that part of the exilic community who thought that the worst was over and Jerusalem was going to survive this Babylon scare and go on just as it had in the past. This time, Ezekiel is saying, destruction is assured.

In Chapter 16, the language is graphic and almost shocking. Ezekiel meant for it to be so because he is trying to shock his readers into realizing the grave circumstances in which the nation of Judah and the people of Jerusalem had placed themselves by their wanton and repeated sin.

The basic plot line of Ezekiel's story is that a passing traveler found an infant girl left bleeding and naked to die in the wilderness. In many ancient cultures because the preference for males is so strong, some female babies are still abandoned and left to die. The traveler rescues the child and gives her the gift of life.

On a second trip, the traveler finds that the abandoned child has grown to a marriageable age. He uses the customary symbolic act of spreading the lower part of his tunic over her. He cleans her up, purifies her, covers her nakedness with wonderful garments and bedecks her with jewels. In short he makes a queen of her and her beauty becomes the talk of the nations all around. She owes everything to her glorious benefactor who finally marries her. He makes a covenant with her.

But adultery and faithlessness follows -- indiscriminate prostitution -- imagine how bad this would make the husband feel! Ezekiel is helping us to understand how God feels - to the point at which Israel becomes worse than any prostitute that Ezekiel has ever known about. She does not even get paid for her harlotry. Instead

she chases after lovers and gives gifts to them! Specific lovers are mentioned: Egypt, the Philistines, the Assyrians and the Babylonians all get a mention. Every time Israel turned toward one of those nations, she showed her lack of trust in God and was diminished herself. The prices paid for the political and military alliances that were made involved heavy tribute payments (often from the temple treasury -- God's money), the ceding of tracts of land, and diminishing her allotted portion. The political alliances also brought opportunity and often obligations to worship foreign gods.

The spiritual adultery often also led to physical immorality as the fertility rites associated with the worship of some of these foreign gods and goddesses involved real prostitution and gross immorality. Ezekiel also mentions the hated business of sacrificing children to the gods. That was particularly associated with the worship of Molech and while some scholars question whether or not we should take the Old Testament references to passing children through the fire in a literal sense, the language of Ezekiel seems plain enough for me to believe that actual human sacrifices were going on in the last days of Judah's life as a nation. That is perhaps why God says Sodom and Samaria were more righteous than you are. Judah is utterly disgusting to me.

Chapter 17 is an allegory or parable. As such, it is a story not about two eagles and a vine but about Babylon, Egypt and Jerusalem. As with every parable, we need to be careful to look to the scripture itself for the interpretation and after telling us this bird story, Ezekiel provides us with God's interpretation.

The first great eagle is Nebuchadnezzar who, with his huge army, comes to the cedar of Lebanon which is Jerusalem and snatches away the top of the tree. That is the nobility and removes it to Babylon -- the land of the merchants. "He then takes of the seed of the land, that is a member of the royal family, namely Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah and plants him like a willow twig in a fertile seed bed (which must be Jerusalem), where he duly flourishes. However, he is never more than a low spreading vine with limited powers and influence, always depending on his Babylonian master with his branches turned in subservience toward him. The second eagle is Egypt to whom this vine turns for sustenance, but the prophet sees no future in this move. The vine will wither away and be uprooted by the king of Babylon with the greatest of ease." (Taylor, Ezekiel, IVP, p. 144)

At the end of chapter 17 another cedar tree parable is told in which God Himself plants a shoot of the cedar tree high in the mountains of Israel and it flourishes. God is assuring Judah that He will not allow her to be totally destroyed!

God always leaves a remnant. He always does. No matter how faithless the masses may be, there are always some faithful. And God rebuilds them into something amazing. May you always be part of the faithful.